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19-YEAR-OLD GIRL FLIES SOLO AROUND WORLD IN 155 DAYS

Belgian-British pilot Zara Rutherford has set a world record as the youngest woman to fly solo globally in a small aircraft

BAD WEATHER, VISA ISSUES VEX 90-DAY TARGET

Rutherford will find herself in the Guinness World Records book after setting the mark that had been held by 30-year-old American aviator Shaesta Waiz since 2017. Her global flight in her ultralight Shark plane was supposed to take three months, but relentless bad weather and visa issues kept her grounded sometimes for weeks on end, extending her adventure by 2 months

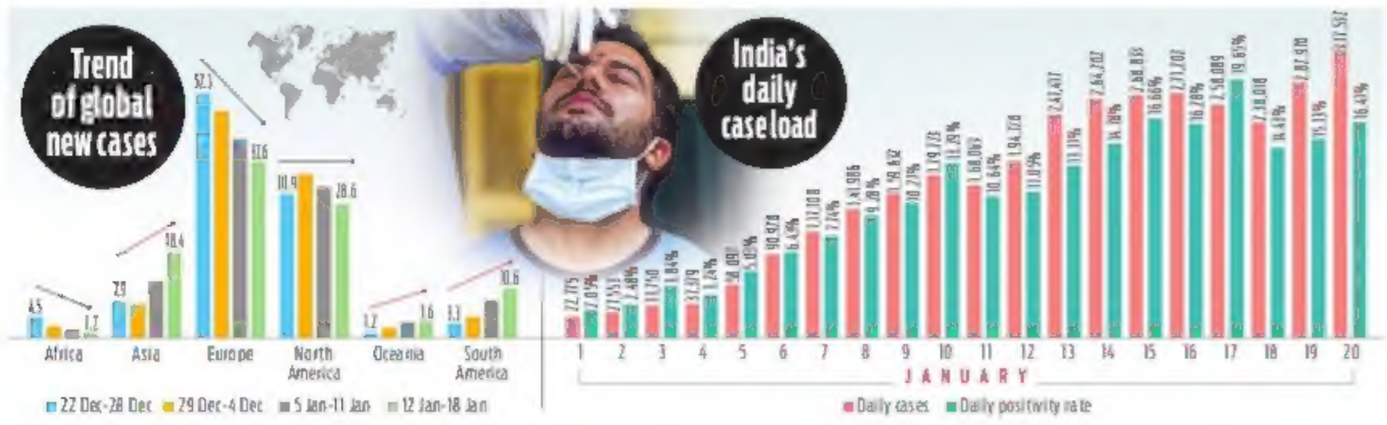
52,000 KM, 41 COUNTRIES, 5 CONTINENTS

- In her trek of more than 52,000 km (28,000 nautical miles), she stopped over in five continents and visited 41 nations
- During her flight using visual flight rules (going on sight only), she steered clear of wildfires in California, dealt with biting cold over Russia and narrowly avoided North Korean airspace

18-year-old

TRAVIS LUDLOW IS THE YOUNGEST TO FLY SOLO GLOBALLY IN A SINGLE-ENGINE PLANE

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TRICHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARMAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI



Virus spreading to remote corners

515 districts have test positivity rate of over 5%; toll low compared to second wave due to vax drive; Maharashtra to reopen schools

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ New Delhi

OVER 3 lakh more Covid-positive case were reported in the country on Thursday morning, but the ratio of deaths and active cases stayed low when compared to the disastrous second wave because of the ongoing vaccination drive.

On the flip side, data shows that the virus is now travelling to new territories as there is a progressive increase in districts with more than 5% positivity rate (TPR). Smaller cities and towns have been particularly affected, Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan said.

About 11 states and Union Territories have more than 50,000 active Covid cases, while 515 districts reported a weekly case positivity rate of over 5%. The national TPR stood at 16.41% on Thursday.

The Centre has retained Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka Maharashtra and Delhi on its list of "states of concern".

On April 30, 2021, there were 3,86,452 new cases, 3,059 deaths, 31,70,228 active cases and 2% of the eligible population fully vaccinated. As against that, 3,17,532 new cases were logged on January 20, 2022, 380 deaths, 19,24,051 active cases, and 72% people fully vaccinated, indicating how jabs are life savers.

"In this third surge of Covid, we are currently not witnessing severe illness and deaths due to high vaccination uptake. This shows that vaccines save," Indian Council of Medical Research head Dr Balram Bhargava said.

With Kerala reporting 46,387 new cases (TPR 40.22%), the state government imposed fresh restrictions, including allowing only essential services to operate on the next two Sundays — January 23 and 30. In neighbouring Karnataka, the fresh case count was close to 48,000, of which 30,540 were in Bengaluru alone. However, there was positive news from Maharashtra, as it decided to open schools for offline teaching in classes 1 to 9 from Monday because of the declining viral load.

In Telangana, the state government decided to do a door-to-door fever survey from Friday. A home isolation kit comprising medicines and other materials, would be provided to those who have Covid symptoms, state health minister T Harish Rao said.

JAB-O-METER
TAKE YOUR SHOT
Jan 19 62,39,009 doses
Jan 20 60,79,373 doses
TOTALS 1,00,53,20,744

NATIONWIDE	JAN 19	JAN 20
Fresh cases	2,82,970	3,17,532
Recoveries	1,88,157	2,23,990
Deaths	441	491

KARNATAKA	JAN 19	JAN 20
Fresh cases	40,499	47,754
Recoveries	23,209	22,143
Deaths	21	29

A student gets vaccinated at a camp at the M S Ramaiah Hospital in Bengaluru on Thursday. The camp was launched along with the BBMP to vaccinate 15 to 17-years-olds

Districts too to get home isolation kits

Bengaluru: With an increase in home isolation during the third wave, Health Minister Dr K Sudhakar on Thursday said just like in Bengaluru, home isolation medical kits will be provided to people in other districts too. P4

State just 0.1% shy of full coverage of first dose vax

BOSKY KHANNA @ Bengaluru

THIS may well be a booster shot for the morale of staff in the Health Department and city corporations who are working extensively to control the virus spread and vaccinate all citizens. After assessing the information shared by the Union Health and Family Welfare Ministry, Health Minister Dr K Sudhakar took to Twitter on Thursday to announce that Karnataka is just 0.1 per cent away from being the first large state (with four crore-plus population) to achieve 100 per cent first dose vaccination coverage.

Officials from the state Health Department and the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike expressed confidence that Karnataka will achieve the target very soon. "Already, Bengaluru Urban district, outside BBMP limits, has achieved 100 per cent vaccination coverage. This shows that the task is not impossible. It is now a social obligation and everyone must understand their duty and responsibility towards society. The door-to-door vaccination drive will be intensified and even those above 15 years of age will be covered," said a Health Department official.

According to the central ministry, 12 states and Union Territories have already achieved 100 per cent first dose coverage in the 18-plus age group. The list includes Chandigarh, Lakshwadeep, Goa, Dadar and Nagar Haveli, Himachal Pradesh, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir, Haryana, Sikkim, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. CONTINUED ON: P3

Cannot box merit in narrow performance definitions: SC

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ New Delhi

THE Supreme Court on Thursday reiterated the constitutional validity of 27% OBC reservation in all-India quota seats in the NEET for undergraduate, postgraduate and dental courses, noting that merit cannot be reduced to narrow definitions of performance in an open competitive examination.

The top court observed that certain classes may perform better in such examinations thanks to their social, economic, and cultural advantage. "Competitive examinations assess basic current competency to allocate educational resources but are not reflective of excellence, capabilities and potential of an individual which are also shaped by lived experiences, subsequent training and individual character. Crucially, open competitive examinations do not reflect the social, economic and cultural advantage that accrues to certain classes and contributes to their success in such examinations," the court added.

A bench of judges D Y Chandrachud and A S Bopanna in a brief order on January 7 had already upheld the constitutional validity of the OBC reservation while setting ₹8 lakh annual income limit for the quota for economically weaker section.

While giving its detailed order on Thursday, the bench noted that the country is still in the midst of a pandemic and any delay in the recruitment of doctors would impact the ability to manage the pandemic. "Due to this, we hold that the reservation for OBC candidates in the All India Quota seats for UG and PG medical and dental courses is constitutionally valid," the bench said.

Citing the delay in the counselling process due to the pendency of this petition, the bench said: "The petitioners challenged the very criteria for the determination of the EWS, which would not only require us to hear the matter at length but would also entail us to hear all interested parties. We deem it necessary to allow the counselling session to begin with the existing criteria."

WARY OF INTERIM ORDER ON EWS QUOTA

While dealing with EWS quota separately, the SC declined to pass an interim order staying the criteria. "In matters involving challenge to the constitutionality of a legislation or a rule, the Court must be wary to pass an interim order, unless the Court is convinced that the rules are prima facie arbitrary," it said

Wearing hijab indiscipline, says minister as students stand firm

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Udupi, Bengaluru

THE controversy over eight students of the Women's Government PU College, Udupi, who have been insisting on wearing headscarves inside the classroom, is refusing to die down.

On Thursday, the students stood outside their college gate displaying placards, seeking justice. "It is our fundamental right to wear the hijab and the college authorities should not stop us," declared Hazra, one of the students. The girls said they have not been allowed to attend classes since December 31.

In Bengaluru, Primary and Secondary Education Minister B C Nagesh termed the entire episode as political.

Stressing that schools and colleges are not the place to practice religion, he asked the students to adhere to rules regarding the uniform for students, which have been followed since 1985. "There are over a hundred Muslim children studying in the institution who have no problems. Only these few students are choosing to protest. Schools and colleges should not turn into religious centres," he said. He also went on to say that wearing hijab in the classroom would amount to indiscipline as other students may expect similar concessions. CONTINUED ON: P5

ABDUCTED

Army in touch with PLA to get teen back

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Guwahati

THE Indian Army on Thursday contacted the People's Liberation Army (PLA) through hotline, a day after BJP leader and Arunachal Pradesh MP Tapir Gao said a 17-year-old Indian boy was abducted by Chinese soldiers.

A defence spokesman tweeted: "Indian Army immediately contacted PLA through hotline. Assistance from PLA has been sought to locate and return him as per protocol."

The statement also comes in the wake of the Congress targeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi. "Dear PM, how dare Chinese Army transgress into our territory again? Why is Govt not listening to the earnest appeal of its own MP?" said Congress leader Randeep Singh Surjewala.

Meanwhile, China's foreign ministry on Thursday denied such an incident happened. "The Chinese People's Liberation Army controls borders in accordance with the law and cracks down on illegal entry and exit activities," a Chinese spokesperson said.

Upper Siang Superintendent of Police Jummar Basar said the police were trying to ascertain the facts. "Tribals will never cross the border. But, we can't stop them from going into forests. They rely on the forests for their daily needs," the SP said.

STATUE OF EQUALITY

Artisans give final touches to 11th-century Vaishnavaite saint Bhagavad Ramanuja's statue in Hyderabad, to be inaugurated by the PM next month | S SENBAGAPANDIYAN

Govt to decide today on reopening schools

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Bengaluru

EVEN as the state is witnessing a spiral in the number of fresh Covid-19 cases, Primary and Secondary Education Minister B C Nagesh on Thursday hinted at the possibility of reopening schools soon. However, a final decision will be taken by Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai based on suggestions by a panel of experts, he quickly added.

The state Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) on Covid-19 is scheduled to meet on Friday. Speaking to reporters, the minister said that the issue of reopening schools has been considered by the experts, but added that the CM will take a final decision after Friday's meeting.

Nagesh said the government had been contemplating on reopening schools based on data which suggests a lesser impact of the Omicron variant on children. According to sources, schools will have the option to choose between offline and online classes. However, strict measures will be taken to ensure safety of children in schools where clusters have been reported. The minister said that online classes will continue in schools where clusters or positive cases have been reported.

The government had ordered schools in Bengaluru to be shut till January 31. However, Classes 10, 11 and 12 were allowed to function in the light of the upcoming board exams and to encourage children to get vaccinated. The minister said that Covid-19 cases in this wave have mostly affected children in the 0-4 age group and children of other age groups have had a lesser impact.

EXPRESS READ

Bulli Bai: Mumbai cops arrest one in Odisha

Mumbai: The cyber police of the Mumbai crime branch on Thursday arrested a 28-year-old man from Odisha in connection with the Bulli Bai app case. The accused, identified as Neeraj Singh, is an MBA degree holder.

FinMin to release Rs 47,541 cr to states

New Delhi: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has authorised the release of an advance installment of tax devolution to state governments, amounting to Rs 47,541 crore. This is in addition to the regular devolution for January 2022, also being released on Thursday.

This neoschool helps kids stay curious, learn more

DONNA EVA @ Bengaluru

BENGALURU-based ed-tech start-up StayQrious launched the world's first 'neoschool', an after-school online initiative that aims to teach students things that they would not learn in regular schools. The initiative hopes to give children access to an international standard of education without having to attend expensive international schools.

The aim of the school is to offer students a wide range of unconventional subjects and teaching that they will not get during their regular schooling. "Millions of parents want their child to get access to progressive teaching methodologies in an environment that respects their mental wellbeing and doesn't compromise for short-term gain as regards marks. The closest option to solve this today is an international level school, but the barriers to switching to such a school are many," said Aanand Srinivas, founder of the start-up and former content head for Khan Academy.

With the launch of the school, he said they hope to bring to students an international standard of schooling online and make it as accessible as possible at a reduced cost. P5

SKEWED PRIORITY

BCCI has time for everything but Ranji Trophy

VENKATA KRISHNA B @ Chennai

THE Indian cricket board (BCCI) is on verge of cancelling the Ranji Trophy for a second successive domestic season citing a short window available up to the start of IPL in April. It's bizarre considering the same board managed to host two IPLs overseas successfully, two Test series last year, and part of IPL at home during peak of second wave, and not to mention host of white-ball domestic events.

Yet that the BCCI has failed to find a convenient window seems outrageous.

The cancellation of the event will be a big blow for the next rung of up and coming cricketers. This will also hit hundreds of players and match officials financially for the second consecutive year. The BCCI is the only board the world over to not conduct its first-class tournament last season and failure to do so this season too will reflect poorly on the organisational skills of the richest cricket board headed by a former captain.

After BCCI was unable to host full-fledged domestic season in 2020/21, it included all the tournaments for the 2021/22 season. However, it did not have a window for the Ranji Trophy and it was to as late as January to accommodate the Syed Mushtaq Ali and Vijay Hazare Trophy with an eye on the IPL player auctions. While a third wave was not predicted at that stage, having held these white-ball events for the 2020/21 season in January-February 2021,

Old yardstick for selection

With India Test team entering a transition phase, sans Ranji Trophy the selectors will have to pick players based on white-ball cricket and red-ball performances from 2019/20 season.

the move to host them again within a year's time raised eyebrows.

And that decision is proving to be a big mistake. After Ranji was suspended on January 4, the BCCI was hopeful of starting it at least in February and finish the group stages before the IPL (on April 2) and conduct the knockouts after it. But finding even a 35-day window for the group stages look improbable now as players have to enter bio-bubble for IPL by March 20. Also, there are no takers for splitting the event into two as there would at least be a five-month gap because of the IPL and the monsoon. P15